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ABSTRACT

Student participation in educational planning is important for the child, his parents, and teachers. Parents are often reluctant to inform their children when they are in academic trouble, either because they fear their child will lose self esteem or won't understand the information, or because partners often want to avoid the issue. These reasons for not sharing educational information with a child are usually well intentioned but may hurt, rather than help, the child. When honesty is absent children often sense the truth and are confused, sometimes feeling that a subject too taboo to be discussed must indeed be awful. Teachers are sometimes unwilling to take on a task they feel is rightfully the parents' responsibility, and feel caught in the middle. Experience has shown that when children are told openly of their educational problems they generally respond initially with silence, but later are able to open up and discuss future plans to remedy the problems. This involvement gives the child an opportunity to see that the situation is not hopeless and that he/she is not blamed. Often the children themselves come up with some of the best solutions to learning difficulties. (PHR)

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Student Participation in Educational Planning

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It was June. Dale, age 9, was the subject of a conference between his teacher and his father. Dale's teacher was concerned about Dale's slow development and wanted to retain him in 3rd grade and to proceed with a psychoeducational evaluation to shed light on Dale's academic difficulties. Dale's father agreed with the suggestions. A combination classroom of grade 3 and 4 was recommended for September to allow Dale maximum opportunities for growth. Dale's father agreed to discuss the matter with his son.

In September, Dale questioned his new teacher about his separation from former classmates. He also appeared confused as to his 3rd grade assignment. When the new teacher spoke to Dale's father, the latter stated he had never found the right words to tell Dale of the retention and refused to try to do so now. The new teacher was equally adamant in declining to discuss the matter with Dale - she thought it was the father's responsibility.

In this incident, one can see the uncomfortable position of Dale - a position shared by many children who are kept in the dark about their own educational careers.

Parents and Silence

Parents frequently shrink from the truth with their children for several reasons. Sometimes the parents are like Dale's father; they just don't know how to tell the child of educational trouble. They

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fear the child won't understand the information. Sometimes parents conceal information for fear of hurting the child. They feel that the truth of the situation will cause the child to lose self esteem and create self doubt. In a third alternative, the parents refuse to tell the child because they, themselves, refuse to accept the educational difficulty. This situation, often encountered in parents first told of a problem, resembles conscious avoidance of the issue: " If I close my eyes, the problem will go away and everything will be fine."

The above reasons for not sharing educational information with a child are usually based in parental confusion or protection. While understandable and perhaps well-intentioned, such parental "stonewalling" may hurt, rather than help, the child.

Children are usually aware of their own poor performance. Most kids know who is in the "highest" reading group and who is in the "lowest," regardless of the names of the groups or the colors of the books. Children can sense their lack of progress, can see the look of disappointment in the faces of teachers and parents. Problems in learning can create enormous confusion for a child who wants desperately to please the adults in his life.

A child who is encountering learning problems may not understand the difficulty - especially if he/she is achieving up to grade level in some subject areas. The child may be subjected to teasing by classmates, may wonder at the constant poking and probing of psychometrists and may develop involved strategies for concealing poor performance. One little girl was at the top of her class academically,

but in the lower quarter in physical education tasks. To hide her failures, she told friends she passed fitness tests with a grade of "Fs" - distorting the pronounciation of the failing grade to resemble that of "S", the highest grade.

As much as parents might desire, physical and educational problems won't just disappear. The little girl above needs help to develop her abilities just as does the child with a learning disability. If parents don't admit the existence of the difficulty they prohibit the child from sharing his or her feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Most children rely heavily on their parents for support. If this support is absent in the face of problems, the child has nowhere to turn for reassurance. He may even feel that the problem is a taboo subject, something which is too awful to be discussed. In any of the above situations, the child is left knowing the problem exists and bearing the burden of it alone.

Teachers and Silence

Teachers see children all day. They have been trained to deal with kids. So why doesn't the teacher take the responsibility of telling the child about his or her problem? Some parents feel the job of "breaking the news" should fall on the teacher. In response, the regular education teacher justifies her silence with her own reasons. She feels caught in the middle. "How," she reasons, "can I tell Susie about the educational evaluation (or the special class placement, or the resource room) when her parents won't even admit that a problem exists?" Without parental support, the teacher feels she will just be hurting the child who may find the teacher's information contradicted by the parents.

In addition, classroom teachers may feel unqualified or uninformed about the issues and principles of special education. In the face of such unfamiliarity the teacher may feel it is better to say nothing than to say something false or inaccurate. In the current age of accountability and litigation, she may be justified.

Such arguments aside, the child is still left in the dark, knowing something is wrong but unable to identify or discuss that "something." In such situations, children become confused over their problems and the silence of adults. Anxiety over the issue may even contribute to a decrease in academic performance.

Openness: An Alternative

The psychometrist frequently encounters children whose parents and teachers have kept silent. The task of gathering data from tests and observations becomes more difficult and unreliable when the subject is frightened and nervous. In my own diagnostic work, I have found that children can tell you very accurately what they can do. After one lengthy evaluation, I asked a 15 year old boy what he felt his test results would show. "Well," he said," I know English rules pretty well and can read o.k., but math is a problem, especially fractions. Sometimes I have trouble writing neat because I can't see the letters so well when I make them." He had just summarized my findings. When children are this perceptive, they deserve more than silence from the adults in their lives.

As a result of several encounters similar to the above, I began to share information regularly and openly with students. Such involvement allowed me to take advantage of the insight and self-knowledge of the students and, in addition, ensured that they would be fully informed

about their educational situation.

Such sharing included students from the primary years through college. The only qualification has been that the child be able to understand and particiapte in discussions about the teaching/learning process. The primary guideline is that each child can become an informed participant in the processes of educational assessment and remediation.

The steps for accomplishing student involvement are not significantly different from those necessary to include parents in educational decisions. Initially, the child should be told the purpose of, and reason for, an educational evaluation. The child should be told that teachers and parents are concerned about the child's school progress. He should be encouraged to talk about the problems as he sees them. Quite frequently, children are quiet and untalkative at this introductory meeting, but will share feelings and perceptions at later sessions.

In addition to discussing why the evaluation will be done, its procedure should be outlined for the child. Included in this review should be a reassurance that the child will be told the results of the evaluation after its completion. Tests should not be portrayed as games, for they are not. They are tools for understanding the student's learning problems and style. The child should be encouraged to ask questions at this time or during the evaluation. If these questions develop into a need to know whether or not a correct answer has been given, the examiner can honestly state that the child's answer was a good one and that the results won't be known until the examiner can look at all the tests.

Just as with parents, a specific conference date should be set to review assessment findings with the child. The classroom teacher may also be present at this time. Both the parents and the child should understand that each will have a meeting to discuss results. The child should be asked to reflect on the tests taken and his performance on them. The tests can be brought to demonstrate errors and correct responses.

The goal of this meeting is not to spout forth jargon such as: " We observe a marked discrepancy between auditory and visual sequential memory which affects recall of sound-symbol relationships." Instead, relate the child's test performance to everyday activities. A question such as, "Do you find it easier to remember what you read or what you hear?" can serve as an opening to discuss an area of weakness. Areas of strength should also be pointed out so that the child does not feel as though he or she is hearing only negative comments. Throughout, the child should be guided to correct his test results and his learning problems. Ways in which strengths and weaknesses are reflected in home life should also be discussed.

Following this discussion, the child should be told what the school proposes to do to remedy the academic difficulty. It is particularly important at this point to guide the child to an understanding of the techniques and learning settings to be used. As often as possible, the child's ideas should be used. He or she should be included as an active partner in ongoing assessment of progress through the responsibility of graphing performance, setting criteria for success, and/or selecting among equally acceptable alternatives.

Following this meeting and its parent counterpart, the diagnostician, parents, child and teacher should all be brought together to review decisions, share feelings, and complete the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Many times, in such group conferences, children become shy and speechless. A prior individual meeting appears to raise the child's confidence, prepare him to discuss the information he has already heard and help him develop ideas which he can contribute to the larger group. Parents are often surprised at the understanding their children demonstrate at such meetings. Also, since both parents and children have thought of ways to help with the learning problem, this meeting serves as an introduction to sharing ideas and working together to solve the problem.

Treating the child as a full partner in the process of evaluation and planning eliminates the need for regular educators and parents to agonize over how they will tell the child of his problem. This involvement gives the most to the child, however, the learning problem is brought out into the open. The child is given opportunities to discuss his or her feelings about the problem and to see that the situation is not hopeless. No blame is put upon the child, but solutions are discussed. People feel more commitment toward the goals of a program if they take part in setting those goals. Child involvement ensures that everyone involved has a voice in the successful implementation of plans.

One group of adolescents worked in a resource room while being mainstreamed in their college-prep high school. They all were enrolled in regular Freshman English. They all had to read Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. They all were beginning to feel frustration and fear because they could not read the text well. Rather than set down by

teacher decree what they should do, a meeting of the group was called to discuss possible courses of action. The boys decided they could: a) fail the course, b) drop the course and take it over the following semester, even though the same play was to be used, c) drop the course and take a basic English course or d) find a way to learn the material. They decided on the last alternative and, together with the teacher, secured a taped version of the play to listen to. The cassettes were continuously played and the boys even taped review sessions in class. Through work based on their own suggestions, they all passed the course.

The above example shows the commitment of students to develop and follow through on educational suggestions and alternatives. An equally strong illustration comes from a seven year old who was to begin mainstreamed work after four months in a diagnostic classroom. Christopher had actively participated in conferences and progress reviews. He knew he had trouble blocking out extraneous noise - that he would rather join in someone elses fun than make the effort to concentrate on school work. In the diagnostic setting, Chris had experimented successfully with a carrel to focus his attention. In his new class, Chris applied this practice and asked his teacher if he could move to a quiet place when it was time for him to concentrate.

Children know a lot about themselves. They can share this knowledge with us as we try to discover the basis for their problems and the ways to lessen the impact of these problems. It is up to us, as professional educators, to make the most of their knowledge.